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Fugitive women: Slavery and social change in early modern Southeast Asia

Eric A. Jones

Female slaves in VOC-controlled Southeast Asia did not fare well under a legal code which erected a firm partition between free and slave status. This codification imposed a rigid dichotomy for what had been fluid, abstract conceptions of social hierarchy, in effect silting up the flow of underclass mobility. At the same time, conventional relationships between master and slave shifted in the context of a changing economic climate. This article closely narrates the lives of several eighteenth-century female slaves who, left with increasingly fewer options in this new order, resorted to running away.

One day in the early months of 1793 authorities in the Dutch colonial capital became suspicious when they noticed a man carrying what appeared to be a bloody axe (*golok*). When they approached him about the axe (which turned out only to have rust on the blade) they discovered that he was in fact a fugitive slave. The runaway, named Augusto van Sumbauwa, was apprehended and revealed to them a complex of safe houses and runaway accomplices. Augusto had been on the run with his girlfriend, Sapia van Sumbauwa, moving from safe house to safe house. These slaves were given Dutch-style ‘last names’ with ‘van’ implying their ethnicity or geographical origin. They had first rented a back room in the home of a ‘free non-Christian woman’ called Ma or Nyai Sauwa, partially in exchange for repairing her roof, and then moved to a large plantation mansion with other runaways. The mansion belonged to the Captain of the Moors, Mochamat Alie, and one of the foremen (*mandor*)¹ on his sprawling estate, Djemal,²

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¹ In a contemporary description of the Batavian plantation system, Ary Huysers describes the place of the *mandor*: ‘In this colony one must make do with slaves and bondsmen, under the supervision [of a] *Mandoor*, that will say foreman or supervisor over the slaves and plantation, the same as occurs in the West Indies’; Huysers, *Beknopte beschrijving der Oostindische etablissementen* (Amsteldam: Roos, 1792), p. 6.

² It was Djemal’s ‘bloody axe’ that led to Augusto’s arrest. Djemal, Augusto and another slave had agreed to share their wages from chopping wood.

was using the mansion to house fugitive slaves, primarily couples. Sapia and several of her *slavin* (female-slave)³ friends had chosen to run away from their owners. They had done so when denied the opportunity to move ahead in life, including starting a family with their would-be spouse. For example, one of the *slavinnen*, Serana van Batavia (alias Ma Abas) ran away ‘for no good reason’, according to her master, the Moor Dauod Aboe Bakar. Serana, however, did have reasons. She fled to have a child with her new boyfriend after her master sold her former husband.⁴ As these examples suggest, the *slavinnen* and their masters represented two competing notions of slavery and dependence in early modern Southeast Asia.

As long as slavery has existed, so too have fugitive slaves, and the reasons behind both phenomena are as varied as the nature of human bondage itself. In Batavia, headquarters of the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC), some ran away because of physically abusive mistresses. Others fled less blatant torments. Forms of slavery and human bondage existed in Southeast Asia long before and long after the arrival of the Europeans in the region. Whereas a Western presence in Africa and the Americas set in motion new modes of slavery and introduced unprecedented numbers of people to the practice, the European presence in early modern Asia had neither effect but instead fed off an existing slave trade, with the newcomers cornering slave markets much as they had clove markets. The age of commerce in Southeast Asia – commerce in both humans and fine spices – predated the joint-stock companies, but with the coming and most importantly with the record-keeping of the VOC, we are able to keep a head-count of slave traffic and population in the colony. We are also given access to their courtroom dramas and we learn from these dramas the narrative content of a population that was previously nameless and faceless. Equally important, slave narratives, taken in criminal proceedings, are also windows into the slowly changing relationship between Europe and Asia in the early modern era.

Crimes of every sort and severity could land a resident of Batavia in jail and on trial before the Court of Aldermen. In the few areas of early modern Indonesia where the VOC exercised direct physical control, they brought the institutions and conventions of Roman-Dutch law along as their judicial yardstick. The Court of Aldermen or *Schepenbank* provided civil and criminal justice for the non-VOC community; this included legal proceedings involving all Asians, *mestizos* and even Europeans not working for the Company.⁵ Generally, the Court of Aldermen consisted of a mix of nine of the ‘most skilled officers of the fort in the service of the VOC’, ‘the most distinguished, capable and honest of the leading burgers of this city’, and

3 Throughout the article, I will be using the period terms ‘*slavin*’ and ‘*slavinnen*’ instead of ‘female-slave’ and ‘female-slaves’. First, *slavin* and *slavinnen* from the Dutch are more elegant and less cumbersome than their compound word-equivalents in English. Second, they are the terms used in the documents themselves. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the terms are gender-specific and allow for more specificity than the generic term ‘slave’ provides.

4 Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague (hereafter, ARA) 1.04.18.03, inv. 11982 (Attest Dauod Aboe Bakar 4 Apr. 1793), pp. 713–16.

5 For more on the legal landscape see Eric Jones, ‘Courts and courtship: An examination of legal practice in Dutch Asia’, *Leidschrift Historisch Tijdschrift*, 21, 2 (Sept. 2006): 31–50.

‘one of the most distinguished of the [Chinese] nation’.⁶ In Batavia’s Court of Aldermen, slaves and *slavinnen* stood alongside non-slaves accused of many of the same crimes, but the statutes dealt with one offence in particular for the un-free: running away (*weglopen*). The criminal cases involved in this article deal with Batavian *slavinnen* who ran away from their masters and mistresses and were obviously unsuccessful, that is since they were captured and stood trial.

Why did they run? Part of the answer, I argue, has to do with the colonial capital itself. First, Roman-Dutch law compromised an important pillar of Southeast Asian society: social mobility. On the one hand, this may seem contradictory given that many Asian women used the law, through marriage and remarriage, to ascend to the ranks of Batavia’s ruling elite. However, for underclass women outside the Company, Batavia’s Roman-Dutch statutes set up a firm partition between free and slave. The codification of slave versus free substituted a rigid dichotomy for fluid, abstract conceptions of social hierarchy, in effect silting up the flow of underclass mobility.⁷ In addition, the growing plantation economy around Batavia transformed the filial relationship between mistress and *slavin* into a mere money relationship. Thus Batavia itself helped to create the phenomenon of the runaway *slavin*. Second, if the colonial capital created conditions for *slavinnen* to want to run away, it also provided opportunities for them to do so. The relative anonymity of the city and the extensive underclass community opened up avenues and connections for flight even as it left *slavinnen* vulnerable to deception, abduction and abuse on the run. We will first examine conventional notions of Southeast Asian social hierarchy, contrasting them with the structures put into place in Batavia, before moving to the individual runaway cases.

Southeast Asian social systems

Scholars have often described the status of individuals within Southeast Asian social systems as historically interdependent and mobile and here the question of slavery is of particular importance.⁸ Rather than a strict and permanent categorisation of human beings as either independent free individuals or enslaved subjects, Southeast Asians typically found themselves acting as patrons with their own network of clients while at the same time serving in relationships of dependence to others. Slaves and *slavinnen* purchased at auction, for example, could themselves command bondservants partially beholden to them. Rather than freedom being the antithesis to slavery, in Southeast Asia freedom and slavery could be more accurately defined as abstract and opposite ends of a sliding social continuum. To further complicate matters, ‘freedom’ was situational and not something necessarily reducible to a final sum on a balance

6 Jan Pietersz. Coen, *Bescheiden omtrent zijn bedrijf in Indie*, ed. H.T. Colenbrander (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1919–22), vol. 3, pp. 751, 980. The High Colonial Government appointed Aldermen for a one-year term that could be renewed indefinitely. For their services, the colonial government gave the Aldermen fixed salaries, a take of the fines levied, a special seat in church services and an exemption from sumptuary laws forbidding the wearing of excessive gold and silver jewellery. Though they supervised various duties of civic administration including overseeing estate sales, censuses, and weights and measures, their primary task involved sitting in judgement of cases brought before them by the city prosecutor.

7 Anthony Reid, ‘Introduction’, in *Slavery, bondage and dependency in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), p. 14.

8 See the articles in Reid, *Slavery, bondage and dependency*.

sheet. At certain times of the year, an individual might be subject to onerous, even slave labour while in other contexts he or she might enjoy a remarkable degree of autonomy. This high level of social interdependence is rooted largely in geographic realities that also influenced the shape of political systems in Southeast Asia.

As Anthony Reid and others have pointed out, ‘the key to Southeast Asian social systems was the control of men’, not land.⁹ Relatively low population density throughout the region conspired with an extremely mobile populace, especially in the archipelago, to create a pattern of reciprocal rule. People sought the protection and prosperity afforded by a given ruler’s circle of influence (*mandala*), and that ruler’s power and prestige expanded as more and more people attached themselves to the realm. Moreover, peasants were not perpetually tied to the land as were their contemporaries in Europe. In Southeast Asia, should a ruler’s yoke become too onerous, the lure of a neighbouring kingdom, easy seaborne transport, low population density and cheap and abundant building materials allowed families and populations the opportunity to move and seek their fortunes elsewhere. Nowhere is the idea that in Southeast Asia ‘power’ was ‘manpower’ more clearly demonstrated than in the nature of warfare among rival kingdoms. Contests were seldom about conquering territory and were frequently about capturing rival armies and populations. So as not to damage the prized human capital, battles were often symbolic and relatively little blood would be spilled on the field. Captured armies and peoples were taken by the victors, quickly assimilated by the conquerors and eventually allowed social mobility.¹⁰

Furthermore, borders between principalities and sultanates were porous or non-existent. Benedict Anderson described the situation on Java in this way:

[K]ingdoms were not regarded as having fixed and charted limits, but rather flexible, fluctuating perimeters. In a real sense, there were no political frontiers at all, the [p]ower of one ruler gradually fading into the distance and merging imperceptibly with the ascending [p]ower of a neighboring sovereign.¹¹

More than any other factor, the possibility of mobility held a sovereign’s power in check. On a societal level, this potential mobility functioned in much the same way that the threat of divorce did in Southeast Asian marriages. Knowing that women had extra-marital social and economic opportunities forced men to share power in the relationship and to work for their spouses’ affection. Southeast Asian sovereigns knew that their ‘subjects’ also had options outside the realm, and this had a mitigating effect on any royal aspirations to absolute authority, giving people power to vote with their feet. But just because people could relocate did not mean they necessarily exercised that privilege. For an underling, simple cost-benefit analysis might show the dangers of the unknown outweighed the benefits of relocation. Defaulting on a perceived social obligation was undoubtedly a major decision and one not taken lightly. The point is that the potential for flight and social mobility, the dependence of clients on their

9 Reid, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

10 For specific examples in a variety of Southeast Asian contexts, see *Southeast Asia in the early modern era: Trade, power, belief*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

11 Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, ‘The idea of power in Javanese culture’, in *Culture and politics in Indonesia*, ed. Claire Holt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 28.

patrons, and most importantly, the reliance of patrons on their clients, modified the way people interacted with each other to such an extent that it seldom came to flight.¹²

This negotiated relationship between sovereign and subject was replicated all along the social scale from the ruling class down to the underclass. Swidden farmers taken in a slave raid or soldiers captured in warfare might find themselves incorporated into some household's domestic service, integrated into the wet-rice agricultural complex or adopted directly into a family. In order to bury a parent, raise a bride-price or pay a gambling debt, people would also willingly incur debt bondage or enter into concubinage.¹³ Rather than suffering permanent juridical slave status, they could move within the social hierarchy as they intermarried, worked off their debt and took on clients of their own. As Reid has noted 'the important question was to whom you were bonded rather than the abstract legal quality of your bondage'.¹⁴ In turn, their masters would likely be financially and socially beholden to others, and so these 'stratified clusters of patron-client relationships' continued on up to the sovereign.¹⁵

Southeast Asia's cultural matrix was not only complex and its society interconnected; it was also extremely open, adept at assimilating outsiders and their ideas, which allowed for a high degree of individual social mobility. For centuries, Southeast Asia, and especially the Malay world, has been a crossroads for traffic in commerce and ideas. Java's massive, millenary Hindu and Buddhist monuments testify to the region's ancient connection with the Indian Ocean world just as Java's *wayang* tells of the localisation of those traditions and their epics. Onion-domed mosques and cross-shaped cathedrals tell of more recent encounters with ideologies from beyond the archipelago and of the incorporation of those worldviews into the cultural fabric of the region.

Commercial traffic has been just as brisk as the traffic in intellectual and spiritual property. Trade probably was ultimately responsible for – or at least served as the bearer of – the traffic in intellectual and spiritual property. Already in the fifteenth century the Malay Archipelago stood at the centre of a great international trading network connecting India and the Middle East to China through Southeast Asia, with Europe receiving small but valuable quantities of the Asian goods. Each year by the thousands, foreign merchants would sail the monsoon winds to, from and through maritime Southeast Asia, selling their various cargoes of rice, salt, aromatic woods, precious stones and metals, furs and silks and other textiles, porcelain, pepper and fine spices to other traders gathered there, buying their goods in return. Powerful early-modern Malay trading states with urban populations of 100,000–200,000, such as

12 For a sustained treatment on the interplay of power and patronage in Southeast Asia, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); and Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

13 One example from the archives is of a Chinese woman, Nio Kinnio, who sells herself into slavery/concubinage to be able to pay for the proper burial of her father. Her statement was taken while she was being held in eighteenth-century Batavia for trading hatchet blows with a jealous female Balinese slave. ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11967 (*Copia request suppte Njio Kinnio's heeren gemte 24 Mar. 1778*).

14 Reid, 'Introduction', p. 8. Reid is citing Michael Aung-Thwin, 'Athi, kyun-taw, hpaya-kur: Varieties of commendation and dependence in pre-colonial Burma', in the same volume, p. 65.

15 Anderson, 'idea of power in Javanese culture', in *Culture and politics in Indonesia*, pp. 1–70, p. 34.

Melaka on the Malay Peninsula and Makasar in South Sulawesi, attracted Arab, Indian, Chinese and Southeast Asian merchants by providing essentially free ports, warehouse facilities and an adequate legal system, and by policing the waterways for pirates. State and local interdependence within the region combined with trade and traffic from outside to allow for great social mobility in Southeast Asia. Society did not fix status and rank at birth; they were always subject to one's fortunes in the market of mutual obligation and the making and breaking of patron–client relationships.

Historian O. W. Wolters has cited individual charisma as an important feature of the Southeast Asian 'cultural matrix'.¹⁶ His notion of the 'man of prowess' is a critical component in the self-made nature of pre-modern and early-modern status in the region. People chose to follow a given leader based not solely on his or her lineage, but more on the self-made qualities of prowess, pluck and prescience. On a popular level, bilateral or cognatic kinship was one manifestation of how the man or woman of prowess could play out in Southeast Asian kinship structures. Rather than inheritance or dominion being automatically passed through the eldest son (primogeniture), they passed to the most 'worthy' child (male or female) or could be divided among all the siblings. Bravery in battle, grace under pressure, rhetorical skill, financial acumen were all characteristics with which an individual could distinguish him or herself, thus increasing the odds of attracting important patrons, clients and social ties.

Civil law and the colonial capital

The traditional practices and implicit understandings of debt-bondage and obligation were insufficient for some foreign merchants, not only the Dutch, who needed statutory legal assurances that the slaves whom they viewed as their property would behave as such.¹⁷ Batavia's cosmopolitan populace, hailing from every corner of the world, did not share an unspecified set of cultural assumptions among them; some commercial ones, however, were mutual and held dear. Reid and others have pointed to the lack of safeguards for private property, with the requisite legal and governmental apparatus to support it, as a crucial factor marking Southeast Asia's early modern divergence from the West. In the areas under its control, the VOC laboured to establish a place where financial institutions and markets could flourish and where merchants would not hesitate to accumulate and develop fixed capital. Ultimately the fluidity and easy flight inherent in the Southeast Asian social system proved too dangerous for the Company's fixed and hard commercial interests.

Roman-Dutch law provided those firm boundaries and clear distinctions; it also left an otherwise mobile slave underclass with few choices but to run away. Batavian statutory law collapsed this complicated network of Southeast Asian vertical bonding into the simple dichotomy of slave versus free. It concretised what had been fluid, temporary social arrangements and closed off avenues for social mobility. In the same way that the VOC attempted a monopoly on spice production, it also sought to construct a single kind of slavery. Scholars – this author included – recognise and include the many forms of human bondage, broad in both form and intensity, under

16 See O.W. Wolters, *History, culture, and region in Southeast Asian perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1999), pp. 15–40.

17 Reid, 'Introduction', p. 13.

the rubric of 'slavery'. The Dutch East India Company sought to transform that diversity into a legalistic monolith.

The nature of the colonial legal system itself, in addition to the substantive content of its statutes, was antithetical to social innovation. Colonial Roman-Dutch law was a civil law code, as opposed to common law as practised in Britain and elsewhere, and the distinction is important.¹⁸ In a civil law tradition, judges viewed the law code as a comprehensive body of rules and regulations, always referring the facts in a given case back against that original corpus. Juries and defense attorneys, for example, were deemed unnecessary because justice in the form of the court, far from being blind, looked directly at the accused and decided if and to what extent they stood in violation of the statutes. Rather than providing a more neutral common law venue in which prosecution and defence square off before a jury to decide the merits of a case, the civil law judiciary functioned as prosecution and defence, judge and jury. Furthermore, the judicial system did not ask civil law judges to interpret the law or to break new legal ground in their rulings. Innovation was the job of legislators who created and amended the law code. In civil law, therefore, case law and legal precedence had no bearing. As such, civil law was much less flexible and adaptable to changing custom or circumstance. Rather than the common law practice of constant reinterpretation and refashioning of the law case by case and hence moment to moment, civil law decisions referred back to the code. Only legislative overhaul of the existing code or promulgation of a new code could update the law to reflect shifting mores and values.

Civil law codification of slavery led to the unnatural ossification of traditional Southeast Asian forms of slavery, bondage and dependency. A prominent aspect of the region's cultural matrix was the ability to adapt to change and to incorporate exogenous elements while maintaining indigenous integrity.¹⁹ Laws, local and colonial, were and are traditional recipes of a social soup that was constantly being redefined. Statutory law in particular did violence to a society in which change and constant flux were essential. Instead, the Statutes of Batavia froze in time the values and sentiments of a particular historical moment. Though the Statutes themselves were a negotiation between Roman-Dutch law and Indies realities, they were unresponsive to traditional social practice on the ground. The 'cultural assumptions that debt entailed obligation' were insufficient in Batavia's cosmopolitan context.²⁰ Moreover, merchants expected the VOC to protect their belongings, while and the Council of the Indies specifically designed the laws to insure that their slaves remained slaves and property remained property.

18 The term 'civil law' can be confusing because it can be used correctly in two separate instances. One usage (the one used above) applies to the distinction between the two broad categorisations of legal practice, common law versus civil law. Civil law (which relies on a comprehensive law code rather than legal precedent) is, for example, the legal tradition used by much of continental Europe, common law (typified by juries and reliance on case law) is the foundation of all legal practice in the United States and Great Britain, for example. In its second usage, civil law is also used to distinguish between 'civil' matters (such as contracts, property, marriage, etc.) and criminal matters, a distinction which appears in both common law and civil law traditions.

19 See Paul Mus, *India seen from the east: Indian and indigenous cults in Champa*, tr. Ian Mabbett (Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1975) and Wolters, *History, culture, and region*.

20 Reid, 'Introduction', p. 13.

The VOC helped create runaway *slavinnen* by creating a reason for dependants to run away, namely ossifying the previously fluid system of vertical bonding, but Batavia unintentionally provided the means for them to do so. The urban environment, in this case the colonial capital, gave rise to a host of new paradoxes and contradictory possibilities for *slavinnen* looking to escape slavery, namely anonymity, networking and juridically defined slavery. For a woman who could not have gone unnoticed and unaccounted for in a small village setting, the big city with its transient and teeming population provided the requisite anonymity for a *slavin* to slip away, pose as free and blend into the sea of faces. Conversely, this urban vacuity and nameless isolation left underclass women vulnerable to abduction and abuse from predators and conmen lurking unnoticed on the margins of the horde, preying on the vulnerable and unseen; anonymity was perhaps the city's most important runaway resource and also its most dangerous. Batavia was far removed from a setting where everyone appreciated, and laws were unnecessary to convey, the fact that debt entailed obligation and where local ties held patrons and clients together. A city of immigrants, it was also far removed from a community of certainties, securities and protections.

The cases of runaways

Danie

While walking near Batavia's Jassenbrug (bridge) one August morning in 1791, Jiemoen, a *Peranakan*²¹ Chinese boy, noticed something just visible in the canal below. Upon closer inspection he discovered, to his horror, that it was the corpse of his 'good friend' Tompel, whose submerged body bobbed beneath the surface of the water with a noose wrenched around her neck. Jiemoen informed authorities that Tompel, a twelve-year-old girl, was the *slavin* of the Chinese woman Gouw Bianco, but no one seemed to know how she had ended up strangled and 'left prey to the current of the water'. Muddying the already murky details surrounding the girl's death, Tompel's mistress also discovered that her own jewellery box, containing the enormous sum of 1,300 *rijksdaalders*²² in diamond and gold jewellery, was missing. *Landdrost* (bailiff) Steven Poelman painted the picture of the uncertainty that prevailed over the case:

The circumstances of Tompel's terrible death were a mystery. There was suspicion of seduction [i.e., kidnapping] yet who had murdered her remained an unsolved puzzle. And where was the missing chest? No one, not the prosecutor ... nor [Gouw Bianco] knew how Tompel was taken from her home and where she was killed. It seemed that this would forever remain a secret.²³

Gouw Bianco's brother, Gouw Tjansie, was the powerful 'Lieutenant of the Chinese nation' in Batavia and as such not only represented his people to the VOC

21 In Gouw Tjansie's declaration, Jiemoen (a.k.a. Joeman, Jiemon) is referred to as an 'inlander' and in his own declaration we find that he swears by his testimony 'in Islamic fashion'.

22 One *rijksdaalder* is a 2.5 guilder coin; also used interchangeably in this paper as one *rijksdollar* (plural: rds).

23 ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11977, *Eijsch ad Mortem nevens mindere eijschen conclusie crimineel item declaratoir den heer Landdrost, Steven Poelman Ratt: Off: Eijschr contra Amien c.s. 's Heeren gev.* (15 Dec. 1791, pp. 188–9).

authorities but was also able to marshal his considerable resources in solving the crime. As with most slave crimes, investigators closely scrutinised other slaves as potential conspirators. The combing by Tjansie and his *mata-mata* (literally, 'eyes', i.e., spies) through Bianco's house staff turned up no leads.²⁴ Everyone had rock-solid alibis, especially Tompel's fellow *slavin*, Danie van Sumbauwa, who had been with her mistress when the crime was committed. For several days, there was no movement in the investigation and no clues other than the body and the missing jewelry. Then, suddenly, the case broke open when Danie van Sumbauwa came forward 'of her own accord' and began talking, according to the *Landdrost*, 'pained by the sting of her own conscience'. Danie related a complicated story that revealed much more than the circumstances surrounding the death of a slave girl. It further chronicles the erosion of binding, even sentimental, family ties between *slavin* and mistress in the world of the nascent plantation economy. The dramatic turn of events in Tompel's murder highlights the drastic lengths that many were willing to go to in order to break the legal chain that kept them confined to the lowest rung of the social ladder.

The wealthy Chinese mistress, Gouw Bianco, was not Danie's first owner; she had served under previous mistresses. During one of these tours of duty, she made the acquaintance of an Amien van Bugis who was the property of a neighbouring master. Especially when the nature of the relationship between *slavin* and mistress was purely transactional and economic, the affinities of a *slavin* became oriented even more strongly toward fellow slaves with whom she already shared many of the same material circumstances of life. On 25 August 1791 while out on an errand for Bianco, Danie paid a visit to the market stall (Malay: *warong*) of her old neighbour, Amien. Danie was visibly sick; and as she sat eating pineapple by the *warong*, one of Amien's visiting friends asked her about her mistress, saying 'How could *Nyai* send you now, still being sick? Why don't you escape from her?' The questions came from a slave named Akier van Bali who himself belonged to a Chinese mistress, *Nyai* Lotje. Akier spent most of his days running others' wares back and forth to Tanah Abang in a '*prauw*' (*perahu*, a canoe-like boat) 'where', he said, 'I earn a *schelling*'²⁵ each market day for my mistress', in addition to other days when he did 'housework for my *Nyai*'. According to Danie, Akier offered to spirit her away in his *perahu* and encouraged her to make off with some of Gouw Bianco's property as well. Danie agreed.

Two days later at the market, Danie said, there was another meeting between herself and Amien and Akier. They asked if she had been able to get hold of her mistress's valuables. This would be difficult, but Danie had a plan. She called Tompel over from a neighbouring *warong* and introduced her to the others. From the testimonies, it appears that Tompel too was unhappy with her life. Akier quoted Danie as saying: 'My little friend [Tompel] gets hit by her *Nyai* and wants to run away.'²⁶ Court records paint Tompel as 'her mistress's confidante'. It was decided between

24 At the request of Gouw Tjansie, *mata-mata* later shadowed one of the jewellery fences to a Chinese goldsmith who was melting down the precious metal (Decl Tjinde 22 Sept. 1791).

25 This is a silver coin worth 6 *stuivers* (the value of 20 *stuivers* is equal to 1 Dutch *gulden* or *guilder*).

26 Informant Akier, 11 Oct. 1791.

Danie, Tompel, Amien and Akier that the little girl would steal the valuables because, Danie said, Tompel 'had the best opportunity to do so because she spent most of her time by and with the mistress'.²⁷

On a rainy Monday night, 29 August 1791, at 7 p.m., Amien showed up in the canal behind Gouw Bianco's with Akier's boat. Inexplicably, Akier was not in the boat but a fellow slave, Lepo van Bugis, instead accompanied Amien. According to Danie, Tompel had managed to sneak away with the jewellery box and they were heading for the boat when their mistress's voice suddenly rang out, calling for Danie. Frozen, Danie ordered Tompel to head for the *perahu* while she returned to Gouw Bianco. When Danie returned to the canal side a few minutes later, the *perahu* was gone. Literally and figuratively, she had missed the boat. 'Fear', said Danie, made her keep her secret, but after five days, compelled by her conscience, she began telling her story and naming accomplices, each with his/her own story.

While conflicting accounts may leave the circumstances of Tompel's murder in question, they do clarify the social situation for much of Batavia's late eighteenth-century slave population. The law may have bound slaves to their masters but their affinities proved difficult to legislate. Instead of owners adopting slaves into their permanent family network, slaves were market commodities who changed hands frequently and failed to develop bonds of trust and affinity with their owners. Instead, slaves nurtured their own, often horizontal, networks of contacts and confidants with fellow slaves and neighbours. Absent the reciprocal relationships in which slave devotion brought filial promotion and freedom, running away seemed the only avenue for upward advancement.

Thanks to the Chinese Lieutenant and the persistent questioning of the Aldermen, we are offered a glimpse of the network employed by Danie and others involved in their scheme. Gouw Tjansie not only broke the case, getting Danie to testify, but he seems to have also conducted most of the arrests and initial interrogations before turning the defendants over to the *Schepenen*. Danie led investigators to Amien and Akier, who told Tjansie that they had simply come across Tompel's body and the jewellery in the water. Akier acknowledged that his boat may have been involved in the crime, but he was not. He told of how Danie approached him about helping Tompel and her to run away but, he said, 'I turned her down directly ... [because] I must stay with my poor, broke *Nyai*'.²⁸ Amien van Bugis and Lepo van Bugis were in dispute over who had actually committed the murder. Lepo said that Amien had put the rope around Tompel's neck and that he had merely helped restrain her. Amien said they (including Danie) had planned to kill the girl, but that Lepo alone began strangling her with the noose.²⁹ Amien too informed on a friend, Mingo van Bali with whom he had been a fellow slave under a Chinese rice-wine distiller.³⁰ Mingo and his brother,

²⁷ *Eijsch*, 15 Dec. 1791; Decl Danie, 22 Sept. 1791.

²⁸ He was charged as an accessory to the kidnapping and sentenced to a severe lashing and to be branded, chained and sent to labour in the Ambachts quarter for 50 years.

²⁹ This revelation only came after Amien had given up on an earlier story claiming that Lepo had approached him to help bring a sick sister to the *dukun* with Akier's boat; after Amien and Lepo picked up the girl, Lepo disembarked with his 'sister' but returned alone.

³⁰ The distiller was named Lim Konghiem. In 1778, writer Ary Huysers counted 20 rice-wine distilleries (*Araksbranderyen*) in Batavia. (Huysers, *Beknopte beschrijving*).

Laijseeng van Bali,³¹ had acted as fences for the stolen goods and had sent the purloined pieces out to be melted down or radically altered so that they would be unrecognisable.³²

An interconnected web of friends, neighbours and former fellow-slaves knit this crime together; its unravelling dragged all connected before the Aldermen's bench. Corporal punishments ranged from death for the murderers to 15–50 year hard labour sentences for others involved. Danie's sentence was unique because she had actually stolen nothing, nor run away from her mistress. Instead, the court cited Danie as the 'principle source' for the wrongs committed by all the others because of her 'silence in an unforgivable secret'. Prosecutor (*Drossart*) Steven Poelman summarised the Court's position:

With a simple word, Danie could have prevented everything and from whom the smallest token of loyalty would have been enough to save a person's life, would have had time to spare her mistress this great blow, might have saved from the vengeful hand of an uncompromising justice a few of her fellow beings who because of her behavior all underwent a villainous transformation, and finally would not have exposed herself to a danger by which she certainly would have been destroyed. This all seemed unimportant enough to her and she could only achieve her goal by following through with them to whom she gave herself willingly.³³

The Aldermen reasoned that while she could not be given corporal punishment under the strict laws on domestic theft, she was guilty as the crime's catalyst. They charged Danie as an accessory to domestic theft and to the kidnapping, ordered her to view the public deaths of Amien and Lepo and sent her to labour on the public works for 50 years.³⁴

Christina

If allowed to experience some degree of family intimacy, as a real part of their owner's household or with their own spouses and children, many slaves were willing to tolerate their position. Some aspired to wealth, riches and swift social advancement and took great risks to achieve these ends. However, others satisfied their expectations simply by having enough autonomy and agency to choose and remain with a partner. Christina van Ambon was one such *slavin*. When her owners refused to allow her to be with her boyfriend, she disappeared into Batavia's back streets.

Christina had fallen in love with a native burgher named Samuel Fredrik Brandt. According to the *slavin*, she began a relationship with Samuel in 1775 and it progressed to the point where they decided to approach her mistress Sara about an arrangement that would allow them to be together. Sara and her then-husband,

31 Both Mingo and Laijseeng were freed slaves, Mingo from a *Nyai* Mina and Laijseeng from a Tan Hoelo.

32 Spies sent out by the highest-ranking 'Captain of the Chinese Nation', Ong Tjoseeng, shadowed Laijseeng to the Chinese goldsmith and retrieved the pieces from him there.

33 *Eijisch*, 15 Dec. 1791.

34 Given Batavia's already legendary insalubrity, it is difficult to imagine a *slavin* on rations surviving long while dredging the filth from the city canals or performing another of the many onerous tasks for convicted felons. For that reason, Danie's punishment was in effect a delayed death sentence.

Abraham Walburg (a VOC merchant who died while Christina was a fugitive), had purchased Christina at a 1767 estate sale³⁵ for 100 *rijksdollars* and Christina made it known to Sara that ‘there was someone who would give 250 *rijksdollars* for her if she were for sale. Sara promised to speak to her husband about it. Abraham was reluctant to sell Christina and wanted to meet the prospective buyer. Brandt stopped by and the meeting went at least well enough for Sara to hire his services as a goldsmith. He repaired two of Sara’s silver dog collars, a gold flower hairpin, a pair of ‘dangling’ diamond earrings, and buttons for a *kebaya* (women’s blouse), in addition to some rings and a worn-out set of gold buttons belonging to another of Sara’s slaves, Malati. The other transaction, however, proved more difficult to negotiate. Seeing their reluctance to sell Christina, Samuel offered to ‘rent’ Christina for 5 *rijksdollars* a month, promising to teach her how to embroider and how to make bridal veils.³⁶ Despite Brandt’s proposals, said Christina, Sara ‘did not want to listen’.³⁷

One late morning not long thereafter, Christina went out to a *warong* and never came back. Brandt was the immediate suspect in the disappearance. The day Christina went missing, Sara sent one of her slaves five times to his house, asking after her *slavin*. After dark, Brandt pretended to help look for her but eventually slipped away from the search party. Christina showed up that night at Brandt’s brother’s house and a few days later, Christina and Samuel moved in together to a small rented hut on the Rua Novo (Portuguese for New Street). Meanwhile, Sara’s slaves had tracked Brandt to their hut and the couple moved again, this time to a house adjacent to his brother. By removing back wall panels and sealing his door, Brandt had been able to connect the two homes and provide a safe house for himself and Christina to live in.³⁸

For 19 months, Christina stayed indoors except for the occasional night-time trip to the riverbank, her actions more confined in freedom than in slavery. However, her freedom of movement was a sacrifice she was willing to make and was less important than her relationship and future with Brandt. The couple had an impressive run, managing to elude authorities far longer than most runaways did, but even the anonymity of Batavia could not hide Christina forever. Neighbours began to notice something strange about the connected houses, one mentioning ‘there was a rumor circulating that Brandt had taken a girl from *Juff* (Dutch for ‘Miss’), the widow Walburg and he almost always kept the house locked and went out via his brother’s house’.³⁹ Three days before Christmas 1776, acting on a tip from an exceptionally

35 Coincidentally, the *Schepenbank* also supervised estate sales. The estate belonged to a Jan Marchant Carelsz. Carelsz had purchased Christina from someone whose name was abbreviated as ‘d’E S’Glain’.

36 ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11965 (Decl Sara, 9 Jul. 1777); all documents on this case are from this archival bundle.

37 Decl Christina van Ambon, 1 July 1777.

38 Knowing that Brandt was involved but without proof of Christina’s whereabouts, Sara and her husband filed so many formal complaints that an ‘exasperated’ bailiff finally ordered his *kaffirs* (policemen or those empowered to make arrests) to bring Brandt to Sara’s house for questioning. Interrogators, including regular civilians, fired questions at Brandt. In one heated exchange, Brandt’s former neighbour from the Rua Novo said, ‘Give up the girl. Where is she? Put an end to the matter,’ to which Brandt exploded, ‘Did I kidnap the girl!? Can you prove that I took her out of the house?’ (Decl Sara, 9 July 1777).

39 Decl Hodenpijl-Klok-Bouwman, 17 July 1777.

curious neighbor,⁴⁰ Sara's nephew (a VOC bookkeeper for the military), several of her slaves and two of the bailiff's police raided the safe house. Dulla (short for 'Abdullah') van Bugis, one of Sara's 'boys' or slaves, recalled Christina running between the houses and Brandt's sister-in-law warning him in Portuguese: 'Brother, get out of here quick, sissy (Dutch, sic. *susje* or *zusje*) has been caught.'⁴¹

Under interrogation (and possible torture with a cat-o'-nine-tails⁴²), Brandt devised a story about how Christina had appeared at his door just minutes before authorities broke it down, asking him to take her home. When Brandt asked her why she had been gone so long, Christina allegedly told him that her unnamed brother had seduced her into running away, taken her to the highlands, and sold her to 'one of the ubiquitous Javanese from Solo'.⁴³ Unfortunately for Brandt, Christina did not have a brother.⁴⁴ The Aldermen found it 'impossible' that he could not have known her whereabouts. 'Under his commanding care', it was noted, 'she ate, drank, slept and associated with him daily.' *Drossart* of the Batavian Environs Jan Hendrik Trevijn declared that Brandt 'was infected with a fetid soul' but 'was not content with having debauched his neighbor's lowly *slavin* with his foul lustings'.⁴⁵ Beyond that, he had also encouraged her on to 'further evil by relinquishing herself from her master's service in an unlawful and derisive manner'. By first offering to buy Christina van Ambon outright, then to rent her to Samuel Fredrik Brandt, the couple exhausted the legal channels for obtaining her freedom. When Christina's master and mistress refused to let Samuel and her live as husband and wife, they resorted to unlawful avenues for social advancement.⁴⁶

Poedak

In court custody and bearing a seven-month-old baby in her arms, the *slavin* Poedak van Buton sat down and related the story of her years on the run as a fugitive,

40 The tip came from Jurgen Fredrik van der Klok who had been avidly following the case. Van der Klok was a burger who 'coincidentally' happened to be perched in a tree in his father-in-law's yard picking star fruit (*belimbing*) when he saw a woman in Brandt's house dressed in a *kebaya* whom he had never before seen at the door. He sought out others (apart from the Sara or the authorities) who had an interest in the case, even finding someone who had known Christina to see if his description matched. When Sara's nephew asked for his help, he took them to his father-in-law's and let them spy on Brandt, also mentioning that he had seen the girl several times while trying to spy through Brandt's wall panels. From their perch, Ruijsch spotted the girl on 20 Dec. and the *kaffirs* moved on the house two days later.

41 Decl Dulla, 1 July 1777.

42 In the court papers, there is a 'provision for flogging' (*provisie van gijseling*) made before the sentence itself. Normally appearing in sentencing, the phrase '*strengelijk gegeesselt*' succinctly defines both the method and the mode of the flogging. '*Strengelijk*' is rendered as 'severe' in English. '*Gegeesselt*' has as its root the noun '*geesel*', an Old Dutch word defined by the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal op CD-ROM* (Rotterdam: Sdu Uitgevers, 2000) as 'an instrument of punishment for disciplining offenders or for self-castigation, consisting of small ropes whose ends are equipped with knobs, lead loads or iron thorns, for lashing the back and the haunches bloody'. The *geesel* is the infamous whip known in English as the cat-o'-nine-tails.

43 Exam Brandt, 12 July 1777.

44 Notul, 18 July 1777.

45 Consideratien, 29 Oct. 1777.

46 The criminal sentence is missing from the archival bundle, so we do not know their punishment.

the man she fell in love with and the ‘child they brought into the world’.⁴⁷ About two years before, in 1785, Poedak was a *slavin* of the native captain Abdul Wahap Soernang when she ‘became close friends’ with a man named Saual. Saual was then stationed as a soldier at the Utrecht Gate, guarding the west entrance to Batavia’s city walls; like most rank-and-file soldiers he was an Asian male. Soon thereafter, Saual gave up soldiering and made his living cutting rice. Poedak and Saual’s friendship grew until ‘after a time’, as she described in her statement, they had ‘intimate relations’ and ‘one night at 3 a.m.’ he ‘persuaded’ her to leave her master and run away with him.⁴⁸

Soldiers were some of the worst paid employees of the Dutch in Asia and it is unlikely that the poor but passionate soldier-*slavin* couple fled with much in savings. Unlike many of the couples charged by the Aldermem, they conspired only to steal Poedak from her master; the rest of Captain Abdul’s property went untouched. The pair’s relative privation seems all the more likely given Poedak’s description of their subsequent lives as constantly on the move to find work and evade capture. A year after their escape, she gave birth to their child (whose sex is unidentified), sometime around June 1786. While life could not have been easy for the new family, Poedak claimed that they had always found somewhere to stay and ‘were always provided for’. For two years, they moved from place to place with Saual seeking work harvesting rice. Perhaps Poedak was looking to get in on January’s early harvest of dry rice when they moved to Tanjong on 2 January 1787.

Increasingly in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of Batavia’s life and growth pulsed outside the very walls over which Saual stood watch. Villages, towns, estates, and plantations radiated inland from the unhealthy inner city, forming Batavia’s *Ommelanden* or Environs. In Batavia’s early days, when the VOC’s position on Java was so precarious, the Company either took refuge on the sea or hid behind thick castle walls. Batavia itself (formerly Jayakarta) was wrested in 1619 from the dependency of the nearby pepper emporium to the west, the Sultanate of Banten, throwing the Company into an immediate state of war with Banten’s Prince Ranamanggula. Conflict ceased temporarily with the 1624 unseating of Ranamanggula and only came to an end when Banten was brought under effectual Dutch suzerainty in the 1680s. Throughout the 1600s, the Company remained ill at ease with the Javanese, choosing for example to bring in servants and slaves from South Asia, especially Bengal, in the first half of the seventeenth century and from sites in the Indonesian archipelago outside of Java thereafter.⁴⁹ Three days after the Company declared war on Banten in July 1656, the ruling Council of the Indies issued an edict declaring that ‘all the Javanese men, women, and children residing in the city must move out of Batavia and henceforth no more Javanese would be allowed in the city of Batavia’. By the end of the month, the High Government would allow no more Javanese to enter the city

47 ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11972 (Crim. Eijsch, 26 Feb. 1787); all documents on this case are from this archival bundle.

48 Decl. Poedak, 5 Jan. 1787, Crim. Eijsch, 26 Feb. 1787.

49 Remco Raben, ‘Batavia and Colombo: the ethnic and spatial order of two colonial cities 1600–1800’ (Ph.D. diss., Leiden, 1996).

walls because, as the Council reasoned, ‘one can’t tell the good from the bad *Bantammers* [residents of Banten]’.⁵⁰

From Batavia’s eastern approach, Java’s expansionist Sultan Agung of Mataram laid siege in the decade after its founding, but plague halted his advance in 1628–29 just outside the city’s walls. Agung notwithstanding, Batavia’s Environs, especially areas further inland, were considered generally healthier and less malarial than Batavia proper. As the eighteenth-century *pax Neerlandica* eliminated threats from rival Javanese states, the city’s population began spreading out toward what became the hill station Buitenzorg (Dutch for ‘Without Cares’).⁵¹ By coming to Tanjong, Poedak and Saual were on the cutting edge of the capital city’s endless urban sprawl.

As the Batavian Environs were ‘tamed’, the Board of Land Trustees (*Collegie van Heemraden*) ceded huge tracts of land to prominent individuals, a practice mirrored again after 1870 when on a much grander scale, Java itself went on the market to private and corporate capital interests. When Poedak and Saual arrived there in early 1787, Tanjong belonged to the former Batavian Commissioner, Van Riemsdijk, and was managed by a Javanese foreman named Dul Soekoer. According to Poedak, they stayed with Dul while they arranged for a little piece of land in the *kampung* (village) ‘to be able to put up a hut and build a house there’.⁵² Saual said he wanted to ‘fix up an already-standing hut’. Perhaps the couple thought they could settle there with their little baby and stop running. If so, they were mistaken. One morning shortly after their arrival in Tanjong, a former foreman named *Bapak*⁵³ Saringtang came by and began ‘carefully examin[ing]’ Saual.⁵⁴ When the foremen consulted each other they realised that Saual had been lying, telling one he hailed from Poelo (Pulau?) Gadong and the other he was from Cawang. The foremen asked Saual why his story varied and *Bapak* Saringtang asked him to turn over the large, broad curved-blade *golok*⁵⁵ that he wore at his side. Instead of giving up the knife, explains Poedak, Saual fled, leaving the foremen behind. Several minutes later, from the rice paddy to which Poedak had retreated she saw her husband being escorted back to the village by the foremen and posse, his body trussed and his head bloodied. According to several witnesses (including Saual), in the escape attempt he had tripped and fallen face-first on a rock. Villagers later found Poedak in the paddy and, as bystanders did so often in the criminal records, turned her over to the authorities.

50 Jacobus Anne van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch plakaatboek 1602–1811* (Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1885–1900), vol. 2, pp. 227–8.

51 *Buitenzorg* shared the same name, founding date and ideals as Prussia’s *Sans Souci*, the summer palace built by the ‘enlightened despot’ Fredrick II in Potsdam. However, instead of a German ‘Chinese Tea House’ like the one Frederick the Great built to remind him of a fantastic ‘Orient’, Java’s ‘Without Cares’ palace was surrounded by the actual ‘East’, and *Buitenzorg* was meant as a reminder of an ‘Occident’, a place just as fantastic for the ‘European’ born or living in the Indies as the East was for Fredrick and company. *Buitenzorg* is modern-day Bogor.

52 Decl. Poedak, 5 Jan 1787, Decl. Saringtang, 5 Jan. 1787.

53 ‘*Bapak*’ is a polite term of address or generic title for a man, often older. In the records, ‘*Bapak*’ was often spelled phonetically as ‘*Bappa*’.

54 Crim. Eijsch, 26 Feb. 1787.

55 In this particular criminal case the knife is described as a ‘*clewang*’ and also as a ‘*parring*’ (*parang*, cleaver). Elsewhere ‘*golok*’, ‘*klewang*’, and ‘*parang*’ are used interchangeably.

Police hauled the entire family – mother, child and bloodied father – into the *Stadhuis* (Dutch: City Hall) and charged Saual with transporting a *slavin* and Poedak with running away from her master. Unpunished fugitive slaves and *slavinnen* posed a serious threat to older, domestic forms of urban bondage and to a newly emerging coolie-cultivation system, and in both cases the colonial state, through its legislative and judicial systems, sought to punish and prevent this and other forms of human capital flight. Therefore, the civil code was decidedly weighted against kidnapper and runaway, but a loophole outlining the nuances in human trafficking was just large enough to allow Saual to slip through the hangman's noose. Statutes passed in 1688 and 1710 by the *Hooge Overigheid Deezer Landen* (Supreme Government of These Lands), another appellation for the Council of the Indies at Batavia, set down and further clarified the position that kidnapping was a crime punishable by death, 'unless the abducted or trafficked persons are slaves'. Kidnapping free persons was a capital offence, but in the case of illegal slave trafficking, the punishment was left to the discretion of the judges who would weigh the attending circumstances, be they attenuating or aggravating. Trafficking in persons was a crime against human beings but trafficking in slaves was a property crime and the punishments varied accordingly. Saual was sentenced to a 'severe flogging' with the cat-o'-nine-tails, a branding, and 25 years of hard labour.⁵⁶

Poedak and her child spent the next four-and-one-half months in jail, where they would have witnessed numerous criminal sentences being carried out. Their sunken cell in the back basement of the *Stadhuis* presented them with a ground-level view of the execution square. On 19 May 1787, the *scherprechter* (executioner) brought Poedak behind the *Stadhuis* and gave her a 'severe rope-lashing' in full view of the spectators.⁵⁷ Her punishment, though less physically severe than Saual's, was assigned a higher pedagogic purpose and was intended to be as instructive to her peers as it was to her. According to the Aldermen, Poedak 'deserve[d] a severe correction so that by her example others may be frightened away from leaving their masters and she will also weigh the consequences of running away again'. The court further sentenced Poedak to serve her master for a year in chains and to pay all court costs.⁵⁸ Like many *slavinnen*, Poedak did not cite physical abuse or the institution of slavery itself as the reason for running away. She had simply fallen in love and wanted to start a family. Confined by Batavian property laws and denied what was for her a reasonable expectation, Poedak decided to take her chances on the run.

Sitie

One of the richest and most detailed cases in the records of the Batavian Court of Aldermen is the 1792 runaway, fraud and seduction trial of the *slavin* Sitie van Makasar and the medicine-man *Kyai Dukun*, alias Sitjoe de Wangsa. Serving as the *slavin* of a

56 Crim. Eijsch, 26 Feb. 1787.

57 The *Woordenboek der Nederlansche taal* defines 'laarzen' as the 'name for a form of punishment used previously aboard ship whereby a sailor, consequent to a legal judgement, was castigated with a length of rope on the backside'.

58 Crim. Eijsch, 26 Feb. 1787. Though placed in chains for a year, it was implied that Poedak would be earning an independent wage from which to pay that fine.

Moor, Sheik Nannekoe, Sitie allegedly worked her way into her master's good graces, posed as his concubine and embezzled a small fortune on his credit line while hoping to set aside a nest egg for her future freedom. Along the way she was said to have fallen under the spell of a *dukun* (shaman), blaming his black magic as the source of her deception. For the prosecution, the case involved tracing the intricate financial web of pawn and credit, 'fraud and bamboozling', delving into the 'black and dangerous magic' of a 'sorcerer', and bringing clarity to the fuzzy relationship between a *slavin*/concubine and an 'overly permissive' master. For the author, it also involves understanding Sitie and her case as the larger forces of history writ small.

Sitie van Makasar, as her name implies, was originally from the huge port city on the island of Sulawesi. As the Company's factories and fortifications in the archipelago became less tenuous, Southeast Asian instead of Indian slaves became more prevalent and Makasar-based slavers combed the eastern archipelago for human chattel to sell at the Batavian slave auctions. Sitie likely met this fate. From her lengthy interrogation we learn that Sitie had been with her master, the Sheik, for two years and through 'good behaviour she had 'won his trust'.⁵⁹ So much so that she governed the entire household including her fellow slaves whom her master had charged to obey her and to be 'subjected to her'. She also wielded power outside the household including buying and selling on the Sheik's credit. According to Sitie, Sheik Nannekoe treated her as 'a completely free person' and had given her 'the necessary clothing and jewelry' to act as such. As we will later find out, the clothing and jewellery, combined with Nannekoe's treatment and Sitie's deportment, were the enabling conditions in the escape drama that later unfolded. If we can believe what is written of her interrogation, Sitie felt 'completely assured' of her future free status and never 'entertain[ed] the slightest thought of being unfaithful to him or of leaving his house' until a toothache brought her 'the misfortune of falling into the hands' of a Javanese healer named Sitjoe de Wangsa, by whom she was '[led] astray through his wizardry'.

The ordeal began in the summer of 1792 (probably late July),⁶⁰ when Sitie sought the services of Sitjoe de Wangsa in hopes of finding a cure for her sore mouth. 'On the street', according to court records, people referred to Sitjoe as '*Kyai Dukun*' and witnesses did call him by his title rather than his given name.⁶¹ '*Kyai*' is the Javanese title for a traditional scholar of Islam, but it also has pre-Islamic origins in faith healing, soothsaying and martial arts. '*Dukun*' is a Malay term for a medicine-man/shaman or someone who is otherwise a 'custodian of specialized esoteric knowledge'.⁶² Sitjoe seems to have earned his doubly efficacious title of '*Kyai Dukun*', and Sitie went looking for him based on his word-of-mouth reputation as a 'very skillful' healer.⁶³

59 ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11979, *Examinatie van Sitie van Maccassar 's heeren gev. voor den heer Landdrost*; all documents on this case are from this archival bundle. Steven Poelman Ratt: Off./ F, 5 Oct. 1792. Unless otherwise noted, quotes and statements from the subsequent paragraphs are also from Sitie's interrogation.

60 Sitie said it transpired 'some months' before her 5 Oct. 1792 interrogation and Sheik Nannekoe puts the date of the toothache at a little over two months before that date.

61 *Crimineele Notul de dato 1 October 1792 voor de Wel Ed. Agtb Heer Landdrost Steeven Poelman R:O:/ A.*

62 James Fox, "Culture and Ritual in Indonesia" in *Religion and Ritual: Indonesian Heritage Encyclopedia*, ed. J J Fox (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1998), Vol. 9, pp. 98–9.

63 Exam Sitie, 5 Oct 1792.

Unable to locate him after searching all morning, Sitie was returning home and had stopped off at a *warong* to buy betel from a woman named Ma Alie. Ma Alie related to her that a *Kyai Dukun* had just stopped by her *warong*. Sitie approached him and the *Dukun* offered to buy her a cup of coffee at Ma Alie's food stall. *Kyai Dukun* told Sitie that he had medicine for her mouth; she accepted his invitation to visit his home⁶⁴ in Pisang Batu and the two were received there by his wife, a 'very old woman' named Ranati. Despite being treated in a 'very friendly [manner] by this couple', when evening fell Sitie wanted to return home. She was probably acutely aware of Sections 21 and 22 of the Slave Statutes, drubbed into the crowd at the public slave castigations: those transporting, hiding and keeping slaves for up to two meals would be fined; thereafter it would be considered kidnapping, with the slaves often judged as co-conspirators.⁶⁵

Kyai Dukun and Ranati must have also known the risks involved in keeping another's slave. They would later argue, as did others, that they had no idea that this woman who dressed and acted like a free person was in fact a *slavin*. However, according to Sitie, *Kyai Dukun* and Ranati focused on her slave status, becoming more insistent that she spend the night and began filling her head with ideas and designs against her master. Ranati and the *dukun* varied their approach. First they targeted Sheik Nannekoe's 'Moorness', telling Sitie that she 'would be safe with them and that it was better to live with them than with a Moor who as a rule were a bad people and were like unto snakes and upon whom people could not trust.'⁶⁶ They continued their assault, this time with the level-headed argument about the transitory nature of foreign traders, explaining that Sheik Nannekoe would soon be returning to his homeland and Sitie would then be sold, so she should 'take care of herself now and ideally get a hold of sufficient of her master's money to build a house and many other enticing reasons'. Whether it was the *dukun*'s magic or his logic, he convinced Sitie to stay the night. There would be no turning back.

With her toothache still raging, *Kyai Dukun* smeared some medicine on Sitie's head and gave her two documents to wear on her stomach. According to Sitie, he told her that by wearing the enchanted letters her master would feel compassion toward her and would be unable to condemn her conduct and behaviour. She reported that after this procedure she 'felt not the least regard for her master but in contrast, repeatedly experienced a never-before-felt urge to be where the *dukun* was'. Sitie not only spent the night but, she spent eight nights there before returning to her legal master Sheik Nannekoe, though in spirit she was serving a new master with powerful magic. Sheik Nannekoe issued no fugitive slave warrant while she was away and accepted her into the household when she came back on her own. This is not surprising since his testimony suggests that while he may have purchased her as a *slavin*, at the time of her flight he viewed Sitie as 'now his concubine' whom he 'held in very high trust'.⁶⁷ But

64 The place does sound enchanting. Sitie describes it as replete with 'sweet apples and odorous peanuts and many more things'.

65 *Crimineele Eijsch en conclusie door heer Steven Poelman drossaart der Bataviasche Ommelanden RO Eijsch contra Abas – Javaan CS*. 'S Heeren gev: (28 Mar. 1791, pp. 573–84).

66 Contrary to a generalised view of Muslim assimilation in the Malay world, Nannekoe clearly remained distinct from the local Islamic community (whether by choice or compelled by custom).

67 *Declaratoir van Sjech Nannekoe moor voor den heer Landdrost Steven Poelman Ratt*: Off: / B (5 Oct. 1792).

while her situation with Sheik Nannekoe, even after her first absence, was 'good', she was 'unable to stand staying there'. Sitie said she felt mysteriously 'pressed' and 'could find no rest' until she was reunited with the *dukun*, and shortly after her return she ran away a second time to be with him.

With the next runaway episode, the *dukun* had increased his hold and Sitie's absence increased from eight nights to 30. In this world where class and identity were flexible (despite statutory wishes) and could change with one's wardrobe, it was not difficult for Sitie to appear as anything she wanted, though the law made it more difficult to change that appearance into juridical reality. One afternoon, she left Nannekoe for the second time and went to the house of an unnamed woman but found no one home. Sitie had arrived in style in a covered *perahu* and a neighbour woman named Ma Aijo⁶⁸ took her in. She stayed the night at Ma Aijo's before proceeding on to the *dukun*'s. Several days later Sitie returned to her with rice, fish, and betel to thank her for her hospitality. Ma Aijo hosted her for a little over a week, loaning her two *sarongs*. Finally, Sheik Nannekoe learned of her whereabouts and sent 'a trusted Moor', Abdul Rachman, and a Makasarese boy in a wagon to pick her up. In her statement, Ma Aijo like most of the other witnesses was oblivious to Sitie's legal status as a *slavin*, having 'no idea' she said, 'that Sitie was doing this without her master's permission, with whom Sitie lived as a concubine or *goendik* (*gundik*, concubine)'. As further proof of Ma Aijo's unawareness, when Sitie left in Nannekoe's wagon, Ma loaned her three more *sarongs*, telling her that she could hold onto them until she returned. A third escape came shortly thereafter, with Sitie returning on her own after four days. On her fourth attempt the law stepped in and there would be no more running away.

The next few months were tempestuous for Sitie. By her version of events, she was torn between her masters, running away four times, each time blaming the irresistible urge to be at *Kyai Dukun*'s where she was ordered to steal, propositioned to marry, and encouraged to murder. According to Sitie, he would make frequent trips into the city to spy on Sheik Nannekoe, waiting until he was away. Then he would bring Sitie word, telling her to go home and gather up whatever valuables she could lay her hands on so that he could be 'in a position to build or buy a house' for her. Ranati was also said to have told Sitie that 'her husband should marry such a woman' as Sitie because Ranati, citing her own age, 'was an old person and would want her husband to have no one more than Sitie'.⁶⁹ Although she felt a mysterious attraction to the medicine man, Sitie said she was never tempted to marry him. Stated in retrospect and transcribed in the third person, Sitie questioned herself: 'Why couldn't she leave the *dukun* if she saw in him a man for whom she could foster no love', when there were so many things 'more worth her love?' 'Why then', she continued to wonder, 'did she not treat [his advances] with disdain when he once violently tried to kiss her?'

Sitie said that ever since the *dukun* had cast his spell over her, 'from that time forward [she] felt not the least regard' for Sheik Nannekoe. This, however, is

68 Ma Aijo (also spelled Aaijo) lived by the bridge on the Ankeeseweg. Her legal name, the record states, was 'Rahaio'.

69 *Verbaal van Enquesten den heer Steven Poelman drossaart den Bataviasche ommelanden Ratt Off contra Sitie van macasser, heeren comm Engelhard, Martheze adjt Lorh, Smit* (23 Oct. 1792).

questionable. For example, *Kyai Dukun* tried to persuade her to take Nannekoe's things. We will later delve into Siteie's financial misconduct, but when she fleeced her own home at his bidding, she never took Sheik Nannekoe's belongings, only her own clothing and jewellery. *Kyai Dukun* also suggested that through murder, Siteie could be free of her master and could live with him alone, but Siteie rejected 'with revulsion' his proposition that she 'help her master over the edge'. It is impossible to calculate the point at which her agency ended and the *dukun's* control began, but he tipped that balance in his favour by appealing to two slave aspirations manifest again and again in the testimonies given by runaways: stable, long-term love and the nest egg to support it. We have already seen how Siteie spurned *Kyai Dukun's* advances (although she was still brought to tears by her 'longing and emotion' for him), but she moved aggressively to make that second dream a reality.

With considerable style and skill, Siteie lit up Batavia's bazaars, pawnshops, and boutiques with Sheik Nannekoe's formidable credit line. Three things made this possible: his influence, her connection to and amplification of it, and the prevalence of women in the marketplace. Nannekoe was a respected merchant about town, and his public treatment of her as a free person – or at the very least as his concubine – afforded her the requisite credibility to be able to pull off her spending spree. *Nyai Janna*, a 'free Malay' and illiterate Muslim⁷⁰ businesswoman described a visit the couple had made to her house 17 months earlier. She described Siteie as 'dressed in the attire and the sophistication of a free woman' and Janna became acquainted with her as the concubine, not the *slavin* of the 'Moor Nannekoe'. So, three months later when Siteie came 'wearing and acting' the same (that is free and rich) in addition to being attended by two *slavinnen* in a retinue, *Nyai Janna* accepted, without contest, that the 'concubine' was fully authorised to traffic in Nannekoe's name.

The Sheik had unwittingly played an important part in the con by being seen with and treating Siteie as his equal. It was, however, her attention to detail and dramatic flair that enabled her to remain hidden in plain sight by making such an obvious spectacle of herself. The idea of the accompanying entourage was a particularly brilliant gesture on her part and would have rendered her immediately recognisable as a woman of unquestioned consequence.⁷¹ She did not deny the allegation of a *slavin* retinue. When questioned, she said that she often took the slave girls with her for the day to 'show them off' when she went somewhere 'acting like a woman of

70 We know because in her statement she signed with a mark, and she swore an oath in the 'Mohammedanic fashion', which from other court documents was described as putting one's right hand on the Koran.

71 When the Company arrived in Asia, it not only sought to insert itself into a preexisting, fully functional international commercial network but, it also stepped into an established world of diplomatic protocols, conspicuous consumption and cultural performance, within which it sought fluency and legitimisation. Alongside the formalised Asian exchange of diplomatic letters and detailed court protocols in which the VOC engaged, on a broader individual level, Company men and non-Company merchants worked tirelessly to assemble and display the plumage and playthings of the leisured class. In Asia, there existed none of the sober 'embarrassment of riches' believed to have hung like the perpetual cloud-cover over the early modern Netherlands; see Simon Schama, *The embarrassment of riches: An interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

privilege'.⁷² After Sitie's grand entrance with her entourage of *slavinnen*, she asked Janna if she could rent a gold medallion, 18 gold buttons and a black *kebaya*. Janna was in the business of helping Batavia's social climbers afford their adornments by renting them out to others when not in use. Sitie said she needed the things to attend a wedding in style and *Nyai* Janna rented them to her for three *rijksdollars*. In terms of *rijksdollars*, the transaction with *Nyai* Janna was one of the least expensive of Sitie's many excursions with Nannekoe's credit, but as we will later find, it would prove one of the most costly.

Sitie's finery and entourage were a necessary part of her cover and helped her, on another occasion, to leverage wealth, credit and prestige. On 5 October 1792, a Moor named Pier Mochaman testified that several months before, Sitie had visited his home/shop, offering to sell three slave girls to him. The asking price, according to Pier, was too high and 'thus nothing came of that transaction'. How meteoric must have been Sitie's rise to power if she could be bold enough to sell fellow *slavinnen* without their objection? Can we even call her a *slavin* when everyone inside and outside her household treated her as much more than that? The law, however, had a different perspective. It is precisely this disjuncture between the statutory definition and the social reality (and of course her buying spree) which landed Sitie in so much trouble.

Although her bid to sell the slave girls to Mochaman was unsuccessful, it put her on the merchant's radar as a person of means who drove a hard bargain. When Sitie returned three days later with 'her' three *slavinnen* to purchase two sets of gold buttons for 30 *rijksdollars*, Mochaman assumed that her standing was legitimate. Her attempted sale of the *slavinnen* may have been an elaborate ruse, orchestrated to ingratiate herself with him while holding onto the *slavinnen* who were a necessary part of the sting operation. His trust was not won easily, however; he asked her to pay for the gold buttons on the spot. Sitie asked him to extend her credit, informing him that she lived with a Moor in his house on the Pajagalan. Mochaman agreed, but as further insurance he sent one of his own slaves to follow her home to see if the story checked out. It did.

Winning Mochaman's hard-earned trust paid additional dividends. Based on his word, a neighbouring merchant also allowed Sitie to take home valuable luxury items on favourable terms. In court the neighbour, a Moor named Mochamat Tsikini, testified that sometime around June of 1792 'a certain finely-dressed native woman followed by three slave girls' came to his house asking what he had for sale. Tsikini laid out a few things for her. Sitie chose a Bengalese chintz, a long *kust* [Dutch for 'Coast'] garment, and two batik handkerchiefs. The total came to 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ rds. Sitie paid 1 *rijksdaalder*, 6 *stuivers* and took the rest on Nannekoe's account, agreeing to return with cash. In his statement, Mochamat Tsikini said that he trusted her because Pier Mochaman knew where she lived and had sold her things on credit. True – in part – to her word, Sitie did return the next day, Tsikini reported, though not with cash to settle her debts but with a shopping list to incur more. Tsikini obliged and she bought a 20 rd. textile with supplementary gold weft (*songket*, a piece of cloth) and a 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ rds handkerchief, bringing her grand total with Tsikini to 40 rds and 42 *stuivers*.

72 We do not know whether the phrase 'acting like' is an editorial insertion by the sworn court clerk, Johannes Lohr, or whether Sitie did not in fact think she was a 'woman of privilege'.

Following Sitie's trail through the market and bazaars of Batavia demonstrates the richness and diversity of its many and mixed ethnic communities. Seeking out her own roots, Sitie used Nannekoe's credit line to purchase 24 Makasarese *sarongs* from a Makasarese merchant for 66 *rijksdaalder*. It is likely that her origins gave her specialised knowledge from which to judge the textiles of her homeland. She later sold several of these back to the aforementioned Moor, Mochamat Tsikini. Sitie also turned a handsome profit trading through Batavia's ubiquitous Chinese pawnshops. One *peranakan* Chinese merchant, *Bapak* Salee, described how a 'certain well dressed and reputable/estimable female'⁷³ came to his store to pawn a silver betel container and later two textiles, one bearing the familiar gold weft. He gave her 50 rds and warned her that the goods might move quickly, as he would be handing them over to another pawnbroker who was anxious to return to China. Salee knew neither that he was buying stolen merchandise nor that Sitie did not intend to get them out of hock.

From another Chinese broker, we also learn that Sitie occasionally used an alias, but she always added the name she used with the title '*Nyai*'. Oeij Loanko, who moonlighted as a scribe,⁷⁴ told the Aldermen about a 'very well-dressed woman' whom on sight he said he took for a free person, who brought gold-woven textiles (*songket*) and pawned them under the name *Nyai* Daliema for seven rds. Another 'scribe', Na Kienseeng, related a similar scenario when 'a certain eminently attired female calling herself '*Nyai* Sitie' came into the Chinese-owned pawnshop he ran and pawned two unsewn *sarongs* for 3 ½ rds, four days later pawning two more for three rds.

Established shops and merchants were not the only place to do business in Batavia. Then (as now) a labyrinthine network of market stalls and private homes and individuals formed an important part of its commercial landscape. *Nyai* Janna was one such example of an individual meeting a consumer need that fell just between the cracks of the business establishment. In Janna's case, it was creating a way for individuals to make money off their property while not risking their ownership over it, a safer and less permanent alternative than selling or pawning. Slaves, even those recognised as such by the law and the community, were also a vibrant part of this commercial tapestry.

A *slavin* named Jamia also testified about her business dealings with '*Nyai* Sitie'. Her statement was an example of the slow early-late modern transition of Southeast Asia's underclass from upwardly mobile slaves and bondservants to permanent coolies. It is important to note that those nineteenth-century preoccupations with the abolition of slavery, especially in the colonies, were not ultimately pinned on ethical foundations, despite the moral arguments marshalled on abolition's behalf. Slaves and their care and upkeep were expensive, much more so than a 'self-sustaining' population of coolie labourers. Furthermore, the close, often domestic and even familial connections between slaves and their masters/mistresses were no longer in keeping with the impersonal, purely economic nature of colonial *corvée*, plantation and coolie wage-slavery. In this important transition between the patron-client relationship of the old

73 The clerk, Johanes Lohr, added 'or so she appeared to him'.

74 He may have needed to supplement his income by pawnbrokering, for he signed his deposition with a very sloppy mark imitating a Chinese character; the same holds for the scribe Na Kienseeng.

era and the industrial relationship of the new, we find underclass slaves straddling that line: being part of an extended household but also expected to bring home what was known as ‘coolie money’ by working on the outside. Jamia, a *slavin* of the former Captain of the Chinese in Batavia, described how every month she was to earn four rupees coolie-money. Unlike many of her eighteenth-century peers and nearly all of her nineteenth-century peers, the enterprising *slavin* was able to find coolie-money without resorting to arduous plantation labour. Jamia obtained permission from her master and became a low-level pawnbroker. Through Jamia, Sitie pawned several items including one sewn and one unsewn *sarong*, which (not surprisingly) Sitie did not claim and Jamia went on to sell.

With her buying-and-selling spree in high gear and creditors calling on Sheik Nannekoe to settle his debts, Sitie was forced to remain permanently on the run from her master. She would soon have to account for her deeds. Like so many of the civil and criminal disputes in Batavia, a combination of the municipal government and citizen vigilantes carried out the investigation, arrest and occasionally the interrogation. Two weeks after her last visit to *Nyai* Janna, she returned to the businesswoman, *sans* jewellery, asking for another week’s extension, which Janna granted. Not surprisingly, Janna was livid when she found that Sitie had since gone absent without leave, realising she had ‘no real recourse while Sitie was missing’. Since then, Janna had been on the lookout for Sitie and fatefully bumped into her on the street one day. She detained Sitie and demanded that they go see Steven Poelman, chief prosecutor of the Batavian Environs.⁷⁵

On 1 October 1792, Poelman filed a criminal brief before the President of the Court of Aldermen, Johannes Siberg,⁷⁶ bringing formal charges against Sitie and *Kyai Dukun*. Listing her by her full legal name and title, it charged ‘the *slavin* Sitie van Makasar belonging to the Moor Sheik Nannekoe’ with endangering Nannekoe’s property (which included Sitie herself) and with ‘other crimes’.⁷⁷ Though Sitie had accumulated a sizeable nest egg, she had squandered the bulk of it. According to Sitie, much of what she collected went to *Kyai Dukun*.⁷⁸ *Nyai* Janna’s allegations would have been enough to have those charges filed against Sitie but the addition of Sitjoe de Wangsa, alias *Kyai Dukun*, to the brief meant that there must have been an undocumented interrogation of Sitie between her arrest and the 1 October arraignment. Days later, on 5 October, we find the record of Sitie’s formal examination – undoubtedly a

75 The official Dutch title is *Drossaert der Bataviasche Ommelanden, Ratt. Off. (ratione officii)*.

76 Siberg, like most Presidents of the Aldermen, was also a full member of the Indies Council, the highest authority in the Dutch East Indies.

77 In Roman-Dutch law, the first charge of endangerment (*bedreigeschijen*) can apply not only to endangering lives but also to endangering property. In legal parlance, the second vague charges of other offences (*wanbedorijt, wanbedrijf*) usually meant that the alleged crime did not warrant capital punishment or life imprisonment.

78 Some of the items were a gold rupee; *Nyai* Janna’s clothes, buttons and medallion; three of Ma Aijo’s sarongs, Tsikini’s buttons and 50 rds from goods pawned to *Bapak* Salee. A different Salee, this one a *dukun*, was to have received a *sarong* as payment for medicine. Sitie sent another sarong to her sister in Makasar, perhaps hoping to follow it home. Had this been a ‘pure’ escape attempt like others chronicled here, we would have seen more of her ill-gotten gains going towards her flight and her new life. Sitie was instead being used by the *dukun* to further his own interests.

long day as all involved with the trial, which included no fewer than 13 defendants and witnesses, were brought into court to testify and potentially face off against each other on discrepancies in their statements.⁷⁹

The *dukun* pled innocent of wrongdoing and ignorance of Sitei's slave status, and his 80-year-old wife Ranati did likewise.⁸⁰ He claimed that he made a simple living by dealing in medicine or as a practising physician. When asked to identify Sitei, *Kyai Dukun* claimed to know her only because he had met her once by the Jassenbrug by Ma Alie's house. According to *Kyai Dukun*, he never knew that she was a *slavin*. Sitei, he said, claimed simply to have had a fever and needed medicine, so she accompanied him to his house and stayed two days, with a short visit later.⁸¹

Sitei was alone in characterising *Kyai Dukun* as a malefactor, but the picture she painted of witchcraft and manipulation of women was bleak enough to cast a shadow of suspicion over him:

During the time they lived together, she noticed how much power this *dukun* had over others and by conducting his magic arts and means of sorcery various women or *nyonyas* came to him to partake of his good advice and support so that the women folk were chained to him and with no effort he could entice [them] to do his bidding.⁸² When 'company of this sort' would arrive, *Kyai Dukun* would send Sitei upstairs, so she 'never had the opportunity to spy upon the reasons and results of their visits whether they occupied themselves with games or came for medicine and were very familiar'. *Kyai Dukun*, said Sitei, was well known as a 'person who could perform sorcery' and who 'knew how to bring the strangest affairs in order'. Even though her imprisonment and interrogation had afforded Sitei distance from and critical perspective on *Kyai Dukun*, his power over her remained visible even from her jail cell where she said that the *dukun* helped her a lot with her dreams and her sadness and that she 'still felt this longing and emotion for him and even now in prison cannot think about him without breaking into tears'.⁸³

79 In addition to the lengthy interrogation report, Sitei was made to confront *Nyai Janna*, Ma Aaijo, Mochaman Tsikini, *Bapak Salee*, Oeij Loanko, Na Kienseeng and Jamia in turn.

80 Ranati professed her husband's innocence though the Aldermen thought Ranati 'not in a state to do it (i.e., testify) chiefly because of her advanced age which was judged to be at least 80, despite willingness to place her denial next to that of her husband. Despite her advanced age she is very suspect based on that which was said about her by Sitei ... [yet because of her advanced age] the officers of the court will not pursue any [legal] action against this woman'; *Verbaal* (23 Oct. 1792).

81 For her second visit, *Kyai Dukun* said that Sitei arrived in the coach of the City Auctioneer Heemskerk. Her explanation was that one night while she was living with *Kyai Dukun*, she was returning from the market when an unspecified attempt was made on her life. Sitei continued travelling most of the night by boat, finally stopping by Heemskerk's plantation, where she disembarked and hid for the night. She told Heemskerk that *Kyai Dukun* 'was a healer' and in the morning, the auctioneer's coachman brought her back to the *dukun*. The medicine man went in person to thank the coachman for his trouble.

82 *Exam Sitei*, 5 Oct. 1792. '*Nyonya*' is the Malay term for a female descendant of the Chinese-Malay *mestizo* community.

83 Supposing Sitei's story to be true and that *Kyai Dukun* was not simply her 'fall guy', she was in the terrible position of being conscious of what was happening to her but unable to control it.

The medicine man said he only loaned her five rds and she pawned several items to him in return. *Kyai Dukun* denied all wrongdoing but several pieces of evidence matched Sitie's story, tying him to the crime. Two weeks after his interrogation when, as was customary, he was read back his earlier statement and asked to attest to its truthfulness, new facts were presented to him and he had to account for them. The most damning revelation was a pair of gold buttons found in the jail's garbage pile that bore a striking resemblance to some of the missing buttons in question. When pressed, the *dukun* said that he had been wearing those buttons on his shirt when he arrived in jail but had subsequently misplaced them. Sitie had testified that the *Kyai Dukun* had smeared some medicine on her head and given her two charmed letters that would make Nannekoe sympathetic and accepting. Later when the medicine man landed in jail and was searched by the guards, the officers reported finding a tightly folded 'Malay document' bound to his body. Though the court tacitly acknowledged his supernatural powers, the magic charm did not elicit the desired sympathy and acceptance from his jailers.⁸⁴ The Aldermen convicted Sitjoe de Wangsa, alias *Kyai Dukun*, of seducing Sitie into running away and sentenced him to pay court costs and 'toil on the public works' for 15 years, thereafter to be banished from Batavia.

In its final ruling, the Court was particularly concerned with Sitie's path from *slavin* to free-spending *nyai*. Sheik Nannekoe had made good most of the financial losses and so this case, according to *Drossart Poelman*, was less a cautionary tale of fraud than of slave impudence.⁸⁵ 'Under the guise of a free person', said *Poelman*, Sitie 'played her various roles at the expense of her master's bankroll' but was able to do so only because she had been given 'sufficient opportunity' to significantly expand the power Nannekoe gave to her.⁸⁶ Sitie's story is an example of the clash of one notion of status and mobility with a legal system set up to keep people in their place. Following the fluid Southeast Asian model, we see a *slavin* working her way up within her master's household, being given authority over Nannekoe's many slaves and retainers and eventually becoming the sheik's trusted partner, lover and equal. According to Roman-Dutch law and the jurists and Aldermen assigned to her case, however, Sitie was merely a *slavin* under the law and her meteoric rise to the top of the household had not changed that essential fact. For her crimes, the Aldermen ordered Sitie to be bound to a pole, beaten severely with rods on the bare back, confined to chains, sent to toil on the public works for 15 years and thereafter to be banned, in addition to paying court costs.

84 *Examinatie van Sitjoe de Wangsa 'S Heeren gev: voor den heer Landdrost Steven Poelman Ratt Off* (23 Oct. 1792). *Kyai Dukun* denied ever wearing the documents and instead rather randomly insisted that a pair of gold buttons recently found in the *Stadhuis* garbage pile were his and were on his shirt when he was brought into jail. Regarding Sitjoe's magical abilities, *Drossart Steven Poelman* noted his 'sorcery' and his 'incomprehensible power' over Sitie. '*Kyai Dukun* through many, very many peculiar happenings appears to know something of the black and dangerous magic of which Sitie admits to have become a victim.' But in 'supernatural affairs', he deferred 'to wise understandings (i.e., the members of the *Schepenbank*) and the much more enlightened judgement' without making his 'feelings public concerning matters so unusual and dark'.

85 This did not mean, however, that the *Schepenbank* would overlook her financial misconduct. *Poelman* wrote that 'all acts of this nature must be considered so that they do not go unpunished [because] a slave is more severely treated than a free person as in this instance when they [perpetrate the crimes] at the expense of a legal master and commit a kind of domestic theft' (ibid.).

86 *Crim Eijsch*, 10 Dec. 1792.

Poelman assigned part of the blame to Nannekoe. In the eyes of the court, her master had ‘grant[ed] her too much authority’ and his failure to treat her as a *slavin*

was essentially behind the misdeed ... put[ting] her in a certain mindset so that she was able to conduct herself as a free person ... and as a free person [she] stepped outside the boundaries of sincerity and good faith and through cunning and deceitful ways bilked others of their property.⁸⁷

Why would the Aldermen find this ‘certain mindset’ problematic? We should not assume that the Aldermen were opposed to social climbing in principle, first because they had scrambled up to their station by outliving and outplaying other claimants and, second, because abstract moral principles were rarely a deciding factor in the colonies. For the municipal authorities, it was not so much that they possessed a clear civilizing mission statement or that they lay awake nights brooding over the morals and mores of their constituency. On the contrary, it was often the VOC’s blatant amorality which made it so successful. Instead, what likely bothered civil authorities was that Siteie and Sheik Nannekoe’s behaviour threatened one of the basic assumptions of the international merchant community in Batavia: that local laws would ensure that their property could not arbitrarily run away.

Esperanca

Esperanca van Bugis was a *slavin* of the notary Karel Kuvel and his wife. Drawing on an underclass network of friends and lovers, Esperanca and a fellow *slavin*, Isabelle van Timor, attempted a hastily planned and executed escape from their Dutch master and mistress that landed them before the *Schepenbank*. Esperanca was many things to many people – wife, concubine, *slavin*, defendant – and her story helps explain the conflict between the situational nature of class, status and identity on the streets of Batavia and the unbending rule of law in its courtrooms. The tension it produced drove many *slavinnen* to run the legal gauntlet on their flight from their legal masters.

A major point of divergence between Southeast Asian commercial centres and their competing European commercial enterprises was the absence, in Southeast Asia, of clear safeguards for private property.⁸⁸ Those safeguards found, for example, in Dutch-controlled enclaves were an important part of their economic success but that success (and the law code it required) had different social consequences. Its maintenance required an exacting juridical architecture which narrowly categorised individuals as either free or slave. Merchants, especially international sojourners, needed the security and assurance that their property, human and otherwise, was guaranteed until their departure and that their slaves could not simply walk away when they had fulfilled some vague sense of debt-obligation. The constrictions that the statutory code placed on traditional social fluidity closed off other avenues for movement and flux within the urban setting. Painted as *slavinnen* in perpetuity – and, legally speaking, into such a tight corner – many women chose to take their chances as fugitives in the hopes of upward advancement.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Reid, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

Like Sitie van Makasar, Esperanca van Bugis was also from the island of Sulawesi. In the previous century, Sitie's and Esperanca's ancestors had squared off against each other in an important series of wars, whose resolution spelled the end of the last serious contest to Dutch authority in the archipelago. Since the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511, Makasar had become an increasingly important hub in the international spice trade and long-distance bulk trade. Larger than Amsterdam and filled with international trading vessels, Makasar posed a real threat to Dutch monopolistic designs in the region. In 1666 the VOC allied with Bone, a nearby rival seafaring kingdom of the Bugis, and Makasar finally fell in 1669. This accelerated a diaspora of Bugis from Wajo, another Bugis kingdom which had sided with Makasar, and increased instability and slave raiding in eastern Indonesia, the likely origin of Sitie's and Esperanca's status as *slavinnen* from the island of Sulawesi.

From the written record, it is difficult to know exactly who Esperanca was. She had been bought and sold on the slave market several times and was unhappy in her current state. One day after her Dutch master Karel Kuvel castigated her, Esperanca became desperate enough to do something about it. Kuvel lived in Batavia's *kampung* Gatiep, and two Javanese stablemen, Panjang and Serijam, looked after his horses. It was there that Panjang said he 'came to know' Esperanca and 'lived in concubinage' with her.⁸⁹ He said that after her run-in with Kuvel, Esperanca had asked him to take her away. He admitted that he wanted to bring her to the uplands and make her his wife. His friend Serijam also confirmed that there was an amorous relationship between Esperanca and Panjang but described it in slightly different terms. According to Serijam, even before the escape Panjang spoke of her as his wife. In his confession, Serijam related a critical conversation in which Panjang 'said that his wife Esperanca wanted to be taken away'. Her testimony also did not clear up the matter: she referred to Panjang simply as her lover. There was a great deal of slippage in the relationship continuum and the defendants employed a variety of titles to describe their perception of that affinity. At times she was a *slavin*, other times a wife or a lover, and sometimes all three. Meanwhile the Court of Aldermen refused to see her as anything but a *slavin* and never wavered in their insistence on this essential, all-encompassing designation.

As the Aldermen describe it in their conclusion, their case was open and shut. Two *slavinnen*, Esperanca and Isabelle, conspired with two former stablemen to run away from their master, Karel Kuvel. On their way out, the *slavinnen* stole a chest full of valuables from Kuvel and fled until villagers at the Tanah Abang market outside the city apprehended them. The Court also made it clear that the free men would be treated no differently from the *slavinnen*; 'since the first two, although not slaves, were equal participants with the later two, the first shall receive the same harsh punishment as the last'.⁹⁰

Other factors, however, show that the case was less than straightforward. In the first place, Batavia was home to a relatively swift brand of justice, with the *Schepenbank* usually wrapping up investigation, trial, and sentencing within two months of the

89 ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11979, 'Confessie van Panjang, Javaan' (7 June 1792); all documents on this case are from this archival bundle.

90 ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11979, *Crimineele Eijsch en Conclusie den heer Steven Poelman drossaert den Bataviasche ommelanden Ratt Off Eijschen contra Panjang – Javaen c.s.: 'S Heeren gev: over domestique diefte met braak verseld'* (17 Dec. 1792).

arrest. Esperanca and Isabelle were arrested and arraigned on 10 May 1792, but their sentence was not carried out until more than seven months later in December, a point that a second irregularity may explain.

Isabelle was arrested as a co-conspirator, but her ‘stubborn denial of being an accessory’ to the crime seems to have held up the legal proceedings.⁹¹ Roman-Dutch law required a confession for the death sentence and other heavy punishments, to say nothing of the advantages of prosecuting a case with a confession in hand. Torture was the means of ‘bringing around’ a defendant who was less than forthcoming about his or her guilt. On 7 June 1792, we have a record of a confession from everyone on trial except Isabelle. That same day three Aldermen interrogated her, but she continued to deny her involvement in the escape plot, pleading her innocence. Then on 25 November (not long before sentencing) a death certificate for the Timorese *slavin* Isabelle was registered. It stated that she had been ill since 26 July and had finally succumbed to illness in late November. When Isabelle did not confess, she was tortured. She did not die on the day she was tortured, but weeks after her death; the head prosecutor, Steven Poelman, announced that they would be moving ahead with the trial. ‘Notwithstanding Isabelle’s contrary testimony’, Poelman stated, ‘the ruling in this case is to be based on the testimony of the other three’. Isabelle would no longer be a hindrance.

In the absence of Isabelle’s confession, Esperanca provided most of the story line. According to her, Panjang and Serijam had proposed helping her escape from an abusive household but she refused. Her master subsequently moved outside Batavia’s city gate, Nieuwpoort, and so the stablemen, who lived at the home of a Chinese female *warong*-keeper, were no longer able to work for Kuvel.⁹² Nevertheless, Panjang visited his wife/concubine/lover frequently at her new home and in the streets, talking with her ‘about innocuous subjects’. Then one day Esperanca said she met Panjang at a nearby *warong* and he asked if she wanted to run away immediately. She refused and Panjang allegedly pressured her, saying that Isabelle had already accepted the offer. ‘Wanting to be with them’, Esperanca explained, she also agreed to run away.⁹³

The next day when Isabelle returned at 3 p.m. from her errands at the *warong*, she purportedly told Esperanca that Panjang was there waiting for them. In a heated exchange, Esperanca said she was not willing to do it, while Isabelle ‘maintained her resolve’, telling Esperanca that she was taking some valuables with her as well. Then their master, the Dutch notary Kuvel, returned home. He demanded a sandwich, ‘but since they lacked the necessary items to make a sandwich’, according to Esperanca, she went upstairs to fetch some money from Kuvel’s wife.⁹⁴ When she came back down,

91 ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11979, *Crimineele Eijsch en Conclusie* (17 Dec. 1792).

92 ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11979, *Confessie van Serijam, Javaan* (7 June 1792).

93 ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11979, *Confessie van Esperance van Boegis* (7 June 1792); the rest of the quotations about Esperanca are also drawn from this document.

94 They may have lived in a typical two-story Dutch colonial home for there was rarely any discussion of upstairs/downstairs in the Asian houses. And for those who slept upstairs, it may have saved their lives. There is evidence that some of the mosquito-borne diseases of Batavia never struck those sleeping in a second-floor bedroom out of the range of the female *Anophales* mosquito. If Esperanca is telling the truth, they took an incredible risk by stealing a chest and other items from her mistress while upstairs on the same floor. Kuvel’s wife reported that Esperanca indeed came to her upstairs asking for money to buy bread and butter.

Isabelle had stolen a small writing chest. She gave it to Esperanca who took the chest out back and set it behind the door. Esperanca was now a part of the crime.

She said she then gave two other slaves the money to go to buy bread and butter, then went and waited outside the upstairs window. Isabelle threw down one of their mistress's *sarongs* wrapped in a boy's scarf with gold pendants. Esperanca grabbed more of her mistress's clothing and a long shirt from a fellow *slavin* named Minerva, and gave everything to Panjang and Serijam, who were waiting at the back door. Again according to Esperanca, Isabelle waited behind as Esperanca and the stablemen departed, planning to meet up where Isabelle had stashed more of the mistress's valuables. Apparently, Isabelle had an adopted mother living in Manga Dua where she could keep things. For some reason, instead of meeting Isabelle, the three made their way to the Chinese cemetery where Panjang and Serijam smashed open the chest with hatchets (*golok*) and took out the money while Esperanca changed into her mistress's *kebaya* to be less conspicuous. It did not work, for when they arrived at the market at Tanah Abang, they were immediately questioned and apprehended by the locals and brought to the European foreman (*mandor*) who ran that sprawling estate of Indies' Council member Willem Vincent Helvetius Van Riemsdijk. When he searched Esperanca, the *mandor* found 55½ rds, including 24 *stuivers* she was also carrying for Serijam. The foreman accused Esperanca of 'impersonating a native' and made her tell him to whom she belonged. The runaway *slavin* (and those travelling with the fugitive) ended up in jail.

Isabelle was reunited with Esperanca, Panjang and Serijam in prison. Her story before she died was that she simply went out looking for Esperanca and came back to Kuvel's at 9 p.m. after retrieving a *sarong* to wash on loan from a *warong*. The Kuvels claimed it was closer to 10 p.m. when Isabelle arrived home, appearing 'very disconcerted' and bearing a dirty old garment.⁹⁵ The notary and his wife said that they had been away when they returned to find the chest missing. When questioned by her masters, Isabelle said she had been out looking for Esperanca on a *predikant's* [Dutch: preacher's] plantation-estate and that the garment she was trying to hide behind her back had been given to her by a couple of friends in Manga Dua. Her version of events might have been more plausible had it not been for a couple who identified Isabelle squatting under a mango tree. Abdul and Slamien testified that as they were heading down to the river on the night in question, they saw Isabelle and asked her what she was doing.⁹⁶ She reportedly replied, 'I left my master's house to come here and look for Esperanca' Abdul said he sent her away because of the edict against slaves drifting at night, advising her to 'get yourself out of here and back to your master's, so that you don't get picked up'.

On 17 December 1792, the Aldermen assembled the prisoners, minus Isabelle, and read their sentences to them in Malay. They pleaded for mercy but Steven Poelman stuck by the conclusion he had just penned. The executioner would carry out the

95 *Verbaal van Enquesten door Steven Poelman drossaert der Bataviasche Ommelanden Ratt Off contra Esperance van boegis C:S*:

96 Abdul and Slamien said that they were not *waronghouders* but described how they made their meagre livelihood by renting out a space in front of their front door to a 'small *warong* of little importance'. ARA 1.04.18.03, inv. 11979 (*Verbaal van Enquesten*).

sentences that same day. In a response similar to Siteie's case, the Aldermen decried the 'enemy within' element of runaway *slavinnen* and domestic theft. '*Crimen furtum domesticum*', they wrote, 'is a crime of the highest order perpetrated by slaves against the property of their legal master', and they continued with a lengthy discussion about the degree to which domestic theft (by servants or slaves) was worse than normal theft.⁹⁷ Siteie and Esperanca had intimate knowledge of and access to the household and had not only stolen their owner's valuables but, by running away, escaped with a considerable amount of human property. Both cases in close proximity would have been weighing on the minds of the jurists.⁹⁸ Panjang and Serijam were flogged in public, branded, put in chains and sentenced to 50 years, hard labour.

As for Esperanca, the Aldermen wrote that they hoped her punishment would be an example to other slaves contemplating such actions and would address the growing problem of lawlessness among the slave class. 'Such unfaithfulness', they stated, 'occurs so often in slaves that one can expect an exemplary and preemptive punishment as the only means one has of impressing others as much as possible with such a deterrent.'¹¹⁵ Surprisingly, Esperanca was given only half of her accomplices' sentence. Esperanca's story is another example of the unwillingness of the state to see individuals outside their statutory position. Esperanca described herself as a lover, *vis-à-vis* Panjang, while others described her as a concubine and wife. In reality, her social standing was situational and reassessed on a case-by-case basis, but the international commercial capital was unable to manage these fuzzy and shifting interpretations. What mattered to the Aldermen was that she was a *slavin*.

Conclusion

In his edited volume on slavery in Southeast Asia, Anthony Reid argues that only a strong state in an urban setting could 'impose a uniform legal system on [its] inhabitants'. Indeed, the early modern period was marked by increasingly absolutist and monopolistic states, able to set in statute an iron vision of the great chain of being and, more importantly, police it. In Batavia, where not only a strong state governed but also a cosmopolitan merchant population thrived, authorities opted for significant consolidation of, and uniformity in, the legal system. The law attempted to remove plasticity from urban social relations and secure the permanent position of slaves. It increased friction instead. Urban slave statutes, according to Reid, 'created an abstract status of slave as opposed to free, with a juridically defined position as inferior chattels', a position not seen in the countryside.⁹⁹ Rather than assuming their state-assigned role in society as property, many triangulated their status based on the social cues in their immediate vicinity. For example, Sheik Nannekoe and his household did not treat Siteie according to her legal classification as a *slavin* and, barring her run-in with the *dukun*, she would have lived out her life as the functional equivalent of a free person. The state punished her less for being a thief (Nannekoe had repaid her debts) than for being an

97 *Crimineele Eijsch en Conclusie* (17 Dec. 1792).

98 While Isabelle lay dying and Esperanca and the stablemen were detained in jail, Siteie had fled from Nannekoe and was anxiously racking up enormous consumer debt. Indeed, the sentences against Siteie and Esperanca were carried out on the same day.

99 Reid, 'Introduction', p. 16.

out-of-control *slavin*. Site's story and others highlight the collision of a fluid form of social hierarchy within Batavia's fixed juridical arrangement. True to their civil law tradition, when the Aldermen passed judgement on Site, they did not base their decision on the immediate reality – that Site lived the life of a free person – but referred instead to the code which defined Site as a *slavin*.

Other women faced the opposite problem. Their owners shared the state's vision of them as pure property. The firm classification of slave versus non-slave substituted a rigid dichotomy for what had been a rough approximation on a sliding scale of 'freedom'. Many *slavinnen* did not share their owner's assumptions, resulting in their running away. Impatient ones, such as Danie and Esperanca, hastily seized dangerous opportunities to advance their static lives. Christina, for example, made lawful attempts to pursue a family relationship but chose to run when her owners proved inflexible. So while Batavia offered networks and contacts that enabled these women to escape into a new life, on the other hand, it also created the very problems from which they were running.